When the bones are good

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When the bones are good

by aramblingjay

Summary

The thing is, Gale is safe. He knows it.

But the only thing that has ever made him *feel* unequivocally safe is Bucky. And god, how he just wants to collapse into those familiar arms.

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Or: After the war, Gale gets on a bus to Wisconsin.

Notes

Based entirely on the characters from Masters of the Air, not the real men.

Title from Bones by Maren Morris

When the bones are good, the rest don't matter
Yeah, the paint could peel, the glass could shatter
Let it break, 'cause you and I remain the same
When there ain't a crack in the foundation
Baby, I know any storm we're facing will
Blow right over while we stay put
The house don't fall when the bones are good

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The thing is, Bucky is safety.

Gale wakes up with a scream lodged in the base of his throat, the kind of scream that would've woken the neighbors if he wasn't well-trained by now to endure even the harshest of horrors in absolute silence. His first thought, just as it is every night he wakes like this, is that they're being roused for inspection at the stalag.

He's already out of bed, eyes wandering frantically to take in his surroundings, before his mind catches up with his body.

There are no curtains on his window anymore, and enough moonlight shines through to illuminate a map of constellations hanging on the wall directly in his eyeline, placed there specifically for this purpose. Every window in the stalag was boarded up to keep out as much of the cold as a few slats of decaying wood could, and there was certainly no wall decor.

Gale sits on the edge of the bed and releases a long breath. He's home. In Casper, Wyoming, under friendly skies on friendly soil, not a threat within miles except for the four-legged kind in the woods at the edge of the property.

He's safe. He's *safe*.

But it doesn't feel that way. His heart still races in his chest, the sputtering engine of a fort needing to be feathered, and there's a pit in his stomach as solid as any ball-bearing that refuses to budge.

A scuffling sound in the corner—he springs off the bed and whips around, eyes wide, half convinced a kraut is about to knock him to his knees for being up past curfew until he sees the sheaf of paper rustling on the floor. Probably fluttered off his bedside table during the night.

The thing is, he's safe. He knows it.

But the only person, the only thing, that has ever made him *feel* unequivocally safe is Bucky.

He's safe, but Bucky is safety.

And god—how he just wants to collapse into those familiar arms, curled between broad shoulders that could carry the weight of the

world and have certainly carried him all the way around it. He wants and wants, just like he's wanted every single night for the last three months, but today—

Today, Gale pulls on his boots, stuffs enough money for a bus ticket in the pocket of the first jacket he finds, and starts walking.

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It takes three days.

Gale doesn't sleep for a single second of the journey, when before the war he would likely have seized the chance for uninterrupted shuteye before the bus even started moving. Now, after, the hum of the engine is nothing like the roar of a fort—he remembers proudly writing home to Marge once, young and naïve and drunk off the thrill of flying, that there was no sound in the world better than the roar of a fort in the sky—but it's just close enough to the low groan of enemy fighters thousands of feet overhead to keep his eyes wide open.

There's not much to see along the way, just miles and miles and miles of fields that all blur together over the days. It's not until he sees the *Welcome to Wisconsin* signboard through the window that he starts to pay closer attention to each stop they pass, waiting for the one he needs. It would be just like him, really, to make it all the way here and miss Manitowoc by one town, like flying a plane with barely a working engine all the way to Africa and missing the runway by three feet.

God, how he misses Bucky ribbing him.

Bucky sent him a postcard, their first week back stateside. It had a picture of the Eiffel Towel on the front—where Bucky found that in the middle of Wisconsin he has no idea, but Bucky's always been the most resourceful person he knows. The card was short and simple—*Buck, I'm back home safe. Come visit anytime*—but Gale has traced over the scrawled letters every morning since it arrived on his front doorstep, like touching the words would feel almost as good as touching the hand that wrote them. It was the closest he knew he would get, certainly. Until now.

It's raining when he gets off the bus, but he's marched in worse

conditions than a light daytime drizzle. The return address on Bucky's postcard—which he knows was the real gift—is about a half day's walk from the main city, not that he spent the better part of an afternoon in the Casper library weeks ago working that out or anything. He's determined to make it there before nightfall.

A couple of people give him odd looks as he passes through the busy parts of town. Whether that's because the stalag still lingers on his face in hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, as clear as if *former POW* was tattooed on his forehead, or because he really does look like this Buck from Manitowoc that's supposedly his namesake, he ignores them all. There's only one face he wants to see, and he'd bet all his money Bucky avoids town now just as stubbornly as he used to frequent it.

No other reason for him to pick a place on the very outskirts of the city, several miles from his family.

Twilight approaches. The rain worsens, falling in heavy sheets. He's wearing a light leather jacket with no hood and is soaked to the absolute bone, but the steady left-right-left-right rhythm of his feet never wavers. He's marched through Germany in the bitter winter, half-starved and crawling with fleas, waded through snow with threadbare shoes expecting nothing but a cold grave at the end of it all. This, good boots on his feet and the promise of seeing Bucky on the other side, this is easy.

What's new is that now, there's an ache in his right knee with every step. Another souvenir of the war. The doc asked him, when he got back to Thorpe Abbotts, if he knew what caused the initial injury. *No idea doc*, he remembers saying. *Take your pick, I guess.* Between bailing out, landing hard, interrogation, and the stalag, the opportunities were endless. The truth is that he doesn't know, not because he can't remember but because it wasn't any single blow, just the relentless grind of one thing after another pushing his body to the limit until something finally broke.

His knee. And maybe, he thinks some days, his mind.

In any case, it means he can't move quite as fast as he used to. By the time the moon is up in the sky, surrounded by constellations he once knew how to name, he's not nearly as far as he hoped to be.

He briefly considers stopping for the night when he comes across an empty bench by the side of the road. It's the kind of place he's spent the night more than once, but he's no longer just the kid who learned

to sleep rough anywhere he could get horizontal for a few hours. An uneasy fear crawls down his spine at the thought of lying in the open like that, vulnerable on all sides. There are no krauts this side of the Atlantic, but he dismisses the bench all the same and keeps walking.

Almost there.

He thinks of Bucky's wide smile, the curl of the cowlick on the back of his head, the feel of his hand cupping Gale's cheek in that bar a lifetime ago, and keeps walking. Almost there, almost there. God, he *wants*.

He's just starting to think maybe he needs Crosby here to give him a more accurate bearing when a house comes into view. There's a little porch light on, and Gale would cry if he could at the indication that someone is home. Bucky, hopefully.

He's long past keeping up appearances, several states away from home with nothing but the clothes on his back, and *runs* up the dirt path to the house, bad knee be damned. Only when he's already cleared the stairs, each one groaning under his weight like the wood has seen better days, does he consider that Bucky is most likely asleep.

Gale comes to a standstill in front of the door, suddenly nauseous, the decisions of the last several days catching up to him in a rush.

Shame rises like acid in his throat, hot and scalding.

He shouldn't be here.

He shouldn't be here, at Bucky's doorstep in the middle of the night, disturbing him without so much as a warning. He should've written ahead, asked permission—he should've responded to Bucky's postcard at least, *something*, instead of turning up unannounced like this, a bad smell that lingers, the stone in a shoe he used to accuse Bucky of being without ever really meaning it.

Goddammit, what was he thinking?

He shouldn't be here, not like this.

There's a raw, scratchy pressure behind his eyelids that he doesn't think about, and his feet feel like lead blocks as he turns away, but he turns away nonetheless. If Bucky's found some kind of peace here, he deserves to keep it.

“Buck?”

He stops. Flinches despite himself, despite it being the most beautiful sound he’s heard in three months, *Buck* in that familiar voice. Turns, carefully, like it might all be a dream.

And it’s not, it’s not, *it’s not*, because Bucky is right there in front of his eyes, alive and solid and so very real.

“*John*,” he whispers, like a prayer, and then the world slides away.

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He comes to, if it can be called that when he hasn’t really passed out, on his knees on Bucky’s porch, warm hands pressed against his shoulders.

Bucky’s hands. He’d recognize them anywhere.

“Hey, c’mon. Scared me half to death storming up the stairs like that in the middle of the night. What’re you even doing out here in—jesus, you’re drenched. Get inside, c’mon.”

The words wash over him like a salve, the familiar drawl, the timbre, the cadence. He rises to his feet, helped in no small part by Bucky’s steadying hands gripping his arms, and staggers into the house. It’s not quite the entrance he was planning to make, even before he realized coming here was probably a monumentally selfish idea.

Too late, he wonders if maybe Bucky’s settled here with a nice Wisconsin woman, and he’s gone and interrupted that as well.

But there doesn’t seem to be anyone else around. Just Bucky, who deposits him on the couch of what looks like a living room, flicks on a lamp, and hands him a glass of cold water. Their fingers touch, briefly, as he takes the glass, and Gale doesn’t think about that.

He takes a sip, then another, only realizing after he’s drained every last drop how parched he was.

“You look like shit,” Bucky opens with, standing and leaning back against something he can’t make out in the half-dark.

Bucky's eyes are roaming over his body in a precise, methodical scan —checking for injuries and signs of illness. Gale has no room to complain, because he's doing the same back. Like they're both still in the stalag, aware the other would sooner gnaw off their arm than admit something was wrong, but even more aware that the smallest thing could tip the scales of survival.

All in all, Bucky looks alright. He's clearly been eating his portions, filling out his sleep shorts better than he would have when Gale last saw him. He's freshly shaved, his clothes clean, his hands steady enough by his side that he can't have touched a bottle in at least a day or two.

There are also bags under his eyes dark enough to be shiners, and his hair is long and messy and clearly a month or two out from having seen a barber, but Gale would be more worried if Bucky looked perfect, ready to stroll onto the front pages of a G.I. Joe magazine like he wasn't on death's door not four months ago.

"What's the matter, huh? You're worryin' me here."

Only then does he realize he hasn't said a word since they came inside. It's hard to find any, confronted with the enormity of Bucky in front of him. This is what he travelled three days and four states for, but now that he's here, all the words shrivel up and die on the tip of his tongue.

I've been falling apart without you there to hold me together, he thinks, but couldn't say all that even if he could shape the sounds.

"Fallin' apart," is what comes out of his mouth instead, raspy from having said nothing to anyone after *ticket to Wisconsin ma'am* several days ago.

Bucky's face, illuminated in beautiful planes by the lamplight—not that there's any kind of light that doesn't love Bucky—softens into something so raw and fond that Gale has to look away.

There's that pressure behind his eyelids again, every time he blinks, but he hasn't been able to cry in years. This won't be the moment that changes.

"Buck—"

"No one's called me that in—" Well, three months and six days, give or take, except he knows exactly how many days and hours and

minutes and fucking seconds it's been since Bucky's *see you on the other side, Buck* back in England, before they crossed the Atlantic in different planes and came home to different states and the only thing he had of Bucky was a few words on a knockoff Paris postcard. Knows exactly how long it's been since he felt like Buck, or like a person at all, because he has no idea who Gale is and doesn't really want to find out, but he's always been good at being the Buck to John's Bucky.

He's had three days to plan what he was going to do after landing on Bucky's doorstep, and spent every minute of it thinking instead about Bucky's hair and his shoulders and his smile and his voice and the feeling of safety he's been missing for so long. Still, that's no excuse for what falls out of his mouth next.

"Feels safe."

Maybe the excuse is that he hasn't eaten or slept in days, probably weeks if he's being entirely honest. He's soaked to the bone and his knee hurts something fierce and the soles of his feet aren't as accustomed to this after three months of sedentary life as they once were and there's a great big fog in his head that's making any kind of thinking quite difficult.

Or maybe the excuse is just that Bucky's always been his weakness.

"*Christ*, Buck. Alright, c'mon, let me get you some dry clothes. C'mon. I've got a guest room, you can crash there. We'll talk in the morning, okay?"

He stands and doesn't think too hard about the fact that Bucky's using his gentlest *talking new recruits down from the ledge after their first mission* voice on him, too busy drowning in the safety and comfort of it instead. "In the morning," he repeats, and doesn't even realize it's a hidden question until Bucky answers.

"It's my house, you numpty, of course I'll still be here in the morning. Up you go, c'mon."

Bucky shepherds him up a narrow staircase, a hand ghosting over his back but not quite touching. Gale briefly contemplates tipping backwards just to feel those hands catch him, but they're at the top before he can decide—he thinks about *before*, when it was easier to count the days Bucky didn't touch him than the ones he did, and wonders how it's come to this.

Then again, Bucky hasn't asked any questions and is offering him a

place to sleep after letting him in during the middle of the night. Maybe what they are to each other now doesn't look like shoulder pats and thigh grabs and a hand on his cheek anymore, but this. Maybe this can be enough.

He falls asleep in Bucky's clothes, dwarfed by slightly-too-long pants and a slightly-too-broad crewneck that smells just like the man, and has never felt more at home in anything he's worn.

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Gale wakes up to a scream. It takes him a distressingly long time to realize it's not coming from him.

After that realization, however, he's out of bed and padding across the narrow hallway toward Bucky's door before he's really even conscious of having made the choice to do so, breath a harsh pant in the silence. He imagines he was probably reliving some vivid horrors of his own before Bucky's scream broke him out of them—only difference is, whenever Gale wakes up he can't find it in himself to make a single sound.

Bucky's door is slightly ajar, but not enough to see inside without giving himself away. Would Bucky want him to come in? Would *he*, if the roles were reversed?

In the stalag every man had his own demons to fight in the night, whether the echo of flak or ghosts from the past or simply the winter chill. Men sniffling into their pillows in the small hours of morning or taking themselves into hand for a different kind of relief was all met with the same detached, resigned, *whatever he needs to see him through*. No one looked twice at the sight of two soldiers bunking together or otherwise finding comfort in whatever way they could, not in a place like that.

This is Bucky's house, not the stalag, but most nights Gale wakes up and can't immediately tell the difference. Perhaps, in some ways, it isn't so different at all.

There's only one decision to make in the end.

"Bucky?" He pushes open the door and walks toward the shape in the

bed, taking care to announce himself well before he's within arm's reach. There's a faint thought in the back of his head that a man shouldn't enter another man's bedroom for the first time without express permission, but he pushes it away. "You alright?"

"Was starting to wonder if you were gonna haver outside my door all night," Bucky says, neither soft nor scornful, just a statement. But he shifts his pillow just a fraction, a clear invitation.

Gale shuffles over and maneuvers himself into the narrow space on the bed, hesitating only for a moment before pressing his knees to the back of Bucky's thighs and throwing an arm around Bucky's waist. They're well-practiced at the art of fitting two bodies into a bed barely large enough for one, and though the Wisconsin summer is too warm for this kind of tangling of limbs, that's a price Gale is willing to pay to have Bucky this close.

It's been a long time since he's been held. It's been equally as long since he's held someone—since he's held Bucky, the only person who has ever offered their back to him in this way, not as a reproach but with an offer to guard it.

He shifts on his pillow to find a more comfortable position and resolutely does not think about why there was already a second pillow ready on the bed.

Minutes pass, long and short in the surreal darkness. He keeps time only by the steady rise and fall of Bucky's chest beside him and lets the fragile peace of the moment stretch on. Sleep is a long way away, but that doesn't seem like such a bad thing pressed up like this against Bucky's warmth.

Bucky breaks the silence first, because he's always been the braver of them both. Willing to tread paths anew, where all Gale has ever wanted to do is close his eyes and follow Bucky's lead. "What're you doing here, Buck?"

He knows how the question is meant, but that's not something he can answer. His mind is clearer than it was just a few hours ago, could probably produce something better than *feels safe*, even though that's still the truest thing he's said in weeks, but he merely replies, "Heard you scream. I wanted to—" There are a million things he could add but Bucky knows all of them, doesn't need to hear *check if you were okay* or *be sure the krauts hadn't come back* or maybe even *hold you in my arms.* He falls silent.

Bucky, because he's a kinder man than Gale deserves, interrupts before he has to decide which of those to say. "Sorry I woke you."

It's not really an apology, or at least not for that. If anything, it feels like a tacit acknowledgment of their situation—Gale is at Bucky's house in the middle of the night, Bucky has nightmares that make him scream, these circumstances have led to them spooning in Bucky's bed.

In some ways, this is everything he wanted in coming here. In other ways, the distance between them feels larger than ever, this close to Bucky but separated by all the things they aren't talking about.

"Usually I'm the one screaming at night," Gale offers, because Bucky might be the only person left in the world to whom he can say something more than stiff pleasantries.

"Is *that* why you're here, then?"

Coming from anyone else, the question would be unfathomable. But Bucky's allowed, has always been allowed, to peek into the parts of him that are fortressed off to the rest of the world—maybe, deep down, part of the reason he came here was specifically to be poked at in just this way.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," he says honestly. "Just—couldn't be there anymore." Whether *there* is Casper or the stalag he visits every night in his dreams, he doesn't know himself. *Couldn't be alone anymore* lingers in the air, unsaid but likely heard all the same.

"I'm glad you're here, Buck." Quiet and sincere, like a confession.

"Mm."

Gale closes his eyes, and doesn't dream.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> “I just—I want to hold you.” Quiet, so quiet he can barely hear it.
>
> But he does hear it, and Gale’s heart damn near stops. He’s wanted that since Wyoming, since Abbotts, since flight school. He wants it like he wants air to breathe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he wakes up in the morning, at first it feels like just another day in the endless cycle of fitful sleeping and waking that’s become his life.

Then Gale notices his surroundings, and his heart jumps. This isn’t his bedroom.

Bucky.

The other side of the bed, if it can be called that when there’s really only one side to this narrow mattress, is empty and cold. He’s not surprised—Bucky always rose with the sun, like he had some internal alarm clock that started beeping right at dawn. It’s good to see that some things, he thinks fondly, haven’t changed.

He takes a while to leave the room, trying to make sure everything looks just right—straights the sheets, tucks in the bedcover, arranges the pillows.

It’s not delaying, it’s tidying. The least he can do.

Eventually, he does make his way downstairs, not quite sure what to expect. Maybe Bucky will be out of the house somewhere and they can postpone the inevitable conversation a little while longer. In the cold light of day, as it were, it’s hard to face a lot of his actions from the previous night or even examine them too closely for fear of the shame swallowing him whole.

“Morning,” Bucky says cheerfully from what looks like a living room, seemingly oblivious to Gale’s turmoil. “Sleep okay?”

“Yeah, guess so.” It’s not even a lie. By his recent standards, several uninterrupted hours *is* a miracle. “No breakfast?” he asks, glancing around the barren kitchen in search of something to say that feels normal. Delaying, delaying.

Bucky’s cheer evaporates instantly, his expression tight and withdrawn. “Too many memories,” he says shortly, before standing and disappearing out the door.

It closes behind him with a *thud*, and Gale flinches.

He thinks of early mornings eating eggs and bacon, anticipation and fear like twin nooses around his neck, last supper after last supper surrounded by increasingly unfamiliar faces, and regrets asking.

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They settle into a sort of rhythm. Bucky rises first, and tends to keep to himself for the first several hours they’re both awake. Breakfast clearly holds little appeal to Bucky anymore, and to him skipping any one meal is as easy as skipping another, so the mornings pass slow and quiet. The quiet is new—the old Bucky couldn’t let a minute go by in silence unless his life depended on it, and sometimes not even then. But Gale doesn’t mind it. Just Bucky’s presence, reading or drawing or pacing, is enough to put his mind at ease.

Or at least, greater ease than he’s felt in a long time.

Lunch is for conversation. The lighter kind, jokes about friends that made it back and what they might be up to now, traded over whatever portions of bread or meat or vegetables Gale finds at the local market. Bucky lets him use his bike, which makes the travel into town a lot easier, as does the fact that nobody here knows him. No one asks who he is or why he buys enough for two, and it’s just as well because Gale has no idea what he’d say.

Conversation typically peters off in the afternoon, because there are only so many light topics between them. Bucky disappears outside and Gale lets him go, knows he’s on the property somewhere but doesn’t try to follow him. Gale passes the time writing, mostly letters to Marge he’ll never send, not after the way they last parted. Still, it’s nice. Even if he burns each one as soon as it’s finished, it’s at least

something to do.

Evening is his favorite. Bucky tends to come back from his excursions looking steadier than he does in the mornings, shoulders straighter, the brightness of his eyes almost resembling the Bucky of old. He'll usually sit on the same couch where Gale sat that first night and draw, the scratch of his pencil against paper a comforting sound in the background while Gale figures out what to make for dinner. Usually it's just stew or soup, whatever he can throw together—he's never been a good cook, but he's had to learn these last few months, fending for himself. Bucky doesn't participate in the cooking, but he doesn't complain about the meals either, so Gale lets it be.

The drawing is new. Gale doesn't ask about it, scared to disrupt the tentative peace he sees on Bucky's face, just like he doesn't ask why Bucky won't venture outside the boundaries of the property.

Just like they don't talk about the friends who didn't make it back.

Just like Bucky doesn't ask again why he's here or how long he's staying, doesn't ask about Marge or why Gale starts every night in the guest bed and ends it in Bucky's.

But what's another thing or two unsaid between them among so many?

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Only at night, together in Bucky's bed surrounded by the dark, do they truly talk.

"I haven't been sleepin' well for weeks," confessed into the curve of Bucky's neck, which is where Gale's face ends up any time they're in the bed like this.

Bucky always sleeps facing the window, and Gale always takes the left side of the bed, so it's always like this—Gale draped over Bucky, folded together like two commas holding between them all the words they can't face in the light of day.

"Sometimes I wonder if I was meant to make it home," Bucky says back.

A truth for a truth. They trade confessions like currency.

“I like that you gave me your name.”

Bucky lets out a faint huff of air beside him. In a different time, in the daylight, it might have been a chuckle. “I bought your aftershave.”

Several minutes slip by in silence. Some nights, this is where truth would end and the slow march toward sleep would begin.

Tonight, Gale feels up for one more. “If I wake up alone, I think I’m back in the stalag.”

A beat. “If I wake up alone, I think you’re dead.”

In their church of two, this is how confessions work—no comments, no judgment, no absolution. Just a listening ear, and another confession in turn.

He has none left for today, not after hearing that, so Gale tightens his arm around Bucky just a little and says nothing.

It’s not—it’s not exactly what he wants, but he tells himself it’s enough.

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“There are a couple good shops in town, if you need clothes,” Bucky says to him the next morning, interrupting their standard routine of saying very little to each other until lunchtime.

He’s been wearing Bucky’s clothes so far, and something in him immediately rebels at the idea of having to give that up. But he hears the unasked question, which is a different thing entirely: *are you staying long enough to need your own clothes?*

“Might be nice,” Gale says with barely a pause to breathe, because the thought of leaving right now is unimaginable.

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Night falls.

Like every night before this one, Gale wakes just a couple hours after lying down and walks to Bucky's room. His feet do it almost on their own, instinctive. Good thing, because his mind is four thousand miles away and ten thousand feet in the air, watching his men explode in the sky.

Bucky's already awake, as he often is, and stares right at him like he was anticipating Gale's arrival.

Gale's hands are shaking. He stuffs them into the pockets of Bucky's flannel bottoms—which he's still wearing even though he bought himself a nice set of pajamas just this afternoon—and hopes Bucky hasn't noticed in the dark.

Bucky stares at him a beat longer. Then, instead of rolling back toward the window and letting Gale join him as per usual, Bucky pushes himself upright and swings his legs over the side of the bed, settling himself comfortably on the edge.

"Hey, Buck."

"Hey."

Gale takes a seat beside Bucky, off-kilter. Their nightly routine is as unspoken as everything else in their lives, maybe even more so. He doesn't know what to do now that it's changed, doesn't know why it's changed in the first place.

"Marge sent me a letter, you know," Bucky begins apropos of nothing.

Gale's hands are still in his pockets. He doesn't pull them out to see if they've stopped shaking, because he knows they haven't, not when all he can see is flak and fighters and flames.

And now Marge, beautiful, always so beautiful, sitting down at their writing desk when it was still *theirs* and penning a twisted version of a *Dear John* letter as best she could.

"Did she now?" By some miracle, his voice holds steady.

"When I saw the Wyoming postmark, I'll admit, I thought it was from you."

Gale has never written Bucky. He can't say the things he wants Bucky to know in a letter. "I'm sorry to disappoint," he snaps, unfairly.

Bucky *hmms,* the sting rolling off him like it was never there—Gale thinks suddenly that he's never had another friend like him and never will. Doesn't want one either. Just this one. Just this one right beside him.

"I won't ask, Buck. But you know you can tell me."

"She didn't tell you already?" Unfair, again. He can't even say Marge's name, but her presence feels heavy in the room, a reminder that they're skirting the edge of the oldest unspoken thing between them, one that's only remained unspoken this long because she was always there in the back of his mind to hold his tongue.

"Nothing I couldn't've figured out by you showing up on my doorstep."

Gale accepts that as true. Bucky's always read him like no other, and Marge wouldn't tell Bucky anything it wasn't her place to say. Wouldn't make it that easy for him.

"She left me. Or I left her, I don't know. We left each other, I guess." Marge probably told Bucky this much, or Bucky figured it out when Gale arrived a mess, or some combination of the two. Bucky doesn't say anything to confirm either way, not that it matters, and Gale continues. Having started, he finds it's easier to let the story out than hold it back any longer. "She said I wasn't the man she fell in love with, or even the man who proposed marriage to her. *I* barely recognize who I am, John, how can I blame her for lookin' at me and seeing a stranger?"

I don't recognize the Gale I knew in the man standing before me, were her exact words to him, said even then with honesty and compassion. *Or maybe it isn't Gale Cleven standing before me at all, but Buck.* She didn't have a cruel bone in her body, Marge, and she always saw things as they were. She deserved someone who could love her whole.

"Someone once told me that this version would be the one worth knowing," Bucky says.

"Wise man, that." And one who was holding it together a hell of a lot better than this version of Gale now, despite being in a German POW camp in the middle of a war.

Or maybe because of it.

“Marge could’ve learned the new you,” Bucky insists.

“Maybe.” But there was already someone who knew this new man he was and every step it took to get there. Who he could be sure would recognize any version of him even in absolute darkness and drag him out into the light, because he had already done so more than once. And Gale didn’t have the strength in his soul to cast out that someone who already owned half of it and let Marge back in. “We decided against it,” is all he says. Whether Bucky infers the rest or not, he doesn’t know.

Bucky reaches out—Gale flinches, and hates himself for it. Bucky pauses, just for a second, but finishes the motion, pulling Gale’s hands out of his pockets and holding them in his own.

They’re steady now.

“Let’s go to bed,” Bucky says with a trace of victory in his voice, and runs his thumb ever-so-gently along the arch of Gale’s palm like a caress.

They lay down. Bucky facing the window, Gale facing Bucky’s back, legs entangled—their usual formation.

When it’s been so long he’s nearly asleep, there’s a whisper in the night.

“I’ll always recognize you, Buck.”

Gale lets out a slow breath as that old pressure behind his eyes returns, tears that won’t fall. A truth for a truth, that’s how it works.

“I know.”

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He wakes, for once, to joy.

Or more accurately, he wakes to Bucky singing, just as off-key as ever, sheer confidence making up for the complete lack of vocal talent, and walks down the stairs with a smile. The song isn’t Blue Skies—there’s

a song he can probably never hear again, for a variety of reasons—but it's good to hear any melody in Bucky's voice, when he imagined he never would again.

Bucky hummed once, in the stalag. Singing would be the wrong word for what he did, whispering a tune low and quiet in Gale's ear in the dead of night, when he was sick with something like influenza and things felt so bleak that even living to see the sunrise seemed unlikely. Bucky curled up behind him in Gale's bunk, ignoring Gale's protests that he'd catch the same bug, and hummed to him while rest of the barracks slept so he could think about something other than rotting slowly to his death.

Gale was still alive come morning, when Red Cross packages arrived with food, wool blankets, and medicine to fix him.

They've never spoken of that night again, but Gale holds it close to his heart. Without Bucky, he doubts he would've stayed alive long enough to see help come.

But that wasn't really singing. He hasn't heard Bucky properly *sing* since the party after Trondheim, belting out *nothing but blue skies* like nothing in the world could drag him down. Before they learned just how much was out there waiting to drag them all down.

Lost in the reminiscence of that moment, it takes him too long after finding Bucky dancing to himself in the kitchen to smell the whiskey in the air.

In the air and on Bucky's breath, heavy and sour. Bad whiskey, to boot.

An acrid taste rises in the back of his throat. He should've known.

Even before, Bucky never sang sober.

"I'm gonna get some air," he says, not waiting to see if Bucky even hears, and stumbles out the back door.

It's not that he has an issue with whiskey, even when the stench of it hangs so thick. During the war, the smell of alcohol was as familiar a companion as his own aftershave. From British bars to post-mission blowouts, the men, Bucky included, were rarely sober unless they were on a mission. In the early days, before drinking became as much a way to cope with losses as to celebrate wins, the sour-grape tang was almost a substitute for the aroma of victory.

But this isn't the war any longer.

Gale walks to the tree line at the edge of the property and then further, unsure whether this is still part of Bucky's land but certain this has to be where Bucky disappears to every afternoon. The sound of running water bubbles from somewhere to his right, and Gale follows it, treading carefully through the woods until he reaches what looks to be a small stream.

It's nice out here, beneath the cloudless sky. The trees are tall and green, the water clear and swift. Birds chirp, insects buzz. Weeds grow with abandon along the stream's edge, undisturbed.

The war never touched this place. Out here, it may as well never have happened.

Maybe, Gale thinks, that's why Bucky spends hours here every day, as though hoping to convince himself of the same.

It's hard to say how long he sits by the stream, relaxed on a flat rock with his back against a tree trunk. Long enough, at least, that by the time he hears approaching footsteps, no scent of whiskey accompanies them.

"You found my spot then," Bucky says, coming up to stand beside him. He sounds perfectly sober, but that's never meant anything with Bucky before. "Nice, isn't it?"

"Pristine." Gale can't decide if he means that as a compliment or an insult.

It's nice that a place like this wasn't destroyed in the war. That's half of what they were fighting for, wasn't it? To make sure the war didn't make it to their shores and take their homes.

And yet, sometimes he can't help but think the war left their homes alone and took everything else from them instead.

"I'm sorry. About the whiskey."

Gale tries to remember if Bucky has ever apologized to him before, and comes up short. He doesn't know that he likes it.

"Don't be. We all have our vices, John."

He remembers a time when Bucky used to tease him as *Saint Cleven*,

the man who couldn't be corrupted. Being set upon a pedestal only makes the fall longer, and he's certainly fallen a long way since. In the months before he arrived at Bucky's door, he tried his hand at just about everything to make the world bearable—booze, cigarettes, even gambling. Just the once, before it reminded him so much of his father he spent the night fighting off a different set of remembered horrors entirely.

Nothing helped.

"Not you," Bucky says, without judgment.

"Even me." He's no saint. If he could find any sort of peace at the bottom of a bottle, he would've turned into an alcoholic long ago. There's a reason he left Wyoming in the middle of the night and hightailed it here instead.

His drug of choice has only ever been Bucky.

"Say the word, and it won't happen again," Bucky promises.

There's a reason Gale's never said anything about Bucky's drinking, despite the reminders it brings, and it's this. No matter how hard it would be, no matter how the craving and withdrawal might twist him up inside, Bucky *would* give it up if he asked. And just knowing that is enough to kill every comparison dead.

His father never would've stopped, not even if Gale begged. Not even when he did.

"It's okay." Gale tries to formulate his reasoning into coherent sentences, and finds that there's no way to convey *I won't say the word because I know you'd listen* in a manner that makes sense. He can only hope this will be one of those moments where Bucky just understands him. "I'll tell you if it's not, alright? It's okay."

It is. It will be, once he gets used to it.

"I know you don't really like it, because of—you know. But I've never seen you react like that." Bucky doesn't come out and ask the question. But it's an opening if he wants to take it.

Gale finds that he does. Out here, surrounded by flourishing nature, he's nearly as removed from the war as he feels in the dark in Bucky's bed, and the confession is similarly easy. "It's just been a while since I've smelled whiskey at home, that's all."

Bucky draws in a short, stuttered breath.

At first, Gale doesn't understand. He doesn't think he's said anything surprising. Smelling alcohol in bars and on base and even around the barracks is a very different thing to smelling it in the kitchen of one's home, and for obvious reasons—

"Oh," he exhales, heady. *Home*.

Because this isn't his home, is it? It's Bucky's house, Bucky's land, Bucky's *state*, and he's barely been here a month.

But Gale doesn't take it back.

After a moment, Bucky says lightly, "I made us some lunch."

Gale snorts. Bucky must've been eating *something* before he got here, but the idea of Bucky standing in a kitchen chopping vegetables still feels laughable. "I'm worried already."

Bucky punches him in the shoulder, ever so gentle. Gale covers up his flinch with another chuckle, but doubts he's fooling anyone.

"Just come back when you're ready, okay?" The slightest pause, undetectable unless you knew Bucky as well as he did. "No more drinking at home, I promise."

Light footfalls, retreating, and Bucky is gone.

Gale stays out a little while longer, staring at the stream and the trees and the grass until every last detail is imprinted on his eyelids as surely as anything he saw during the war.

When he returns to the house—to *home*—and sees the spread of rolls and potatoes and fruit waiting on the table, an odd feeling stirs in his chest. Bucky must have gone into town to buy all this.

The feeling is warm and bright, like sunlight. It tastes like hope.

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Gale stands before the mirror, scissors in hand, and doubts.

Bucky's hair is getting long, and it wasn't like he could say no when Bucky asked him, earnest as ever, if he could cut it.

I can't go to a barber. Too much—it'd be too much. Will you do it?

What kind of friend would he be if he can't do this much for Bucky, who's put a roof over his head and a steadiness back in his heart?

"You sure you want me doin' this?" he asks, one more time, just to be sure.

Bucky's eyes meet his in the mirror. Something about the calm, steady gaze makes his heart jump. "No one I trust more."

Well, that's that.

If Bucky's beautiful brown curls are ruined forever, it'll just be one more loss on his conscience. At least they'll grow back.

"Never done this before, you know," he comments, before pushing Bucky's head under the sink to get all his hair wet. Bucky is shirtless. He very resolutely does *not* trace the path of a few stray droplets all the way down his long, broad back before sopping up the rest with a towel. "You might end up bald."

Bucky laughs. It's a small thing, reserved in a way that Bucky never was before, but Gale treasures it nonetheless. "I'm sure it'll still be a hit with the ladies."

"Don't count on it."

Gale doesn't mention that *he* would probably still find Bucky beautiful. Gale also doesn't mention that there hasn't been sight nor sound of any kind of lady at all in the weeks he's been here.

Bucky's smile in the mirror at bringing back that familiar line is reward enough for holding his tongue.

He sets to work, untangling the mess that the extra length and lack of care has turned Bucky's hair into, sectioning off different bits, and aiming for a somewhat-even cut throughout. He's seen men get haircuts a million times on base, and knows the approximate steps, even if he can produce only a mimicry of a barber's deft motions.

It's strangely intimate in parts, his hands at Bucky's nape and along his jaw, brushing away falling strands or turning his head left and

right to get at the side he wants. Bucky's skin is warm underneath his fingers. If he lingers a little with each touch, neither of them mentions it.

Half an hour later, Bucky has a sort of scraggly mid-cut that wouldn't pass any kind of official inspection but is a sight better than what he was sporting before.

"I like it," Bucky declares, with all the authority of a fucking General, and it's the only seal of approval Gale needs. "Good work, Major."

He flushes, just a little, and hopes the dim lighting of the bathroom hides it well enough.

Bucky turns this way and that, catching all his angles in the mirror and running his fingers through the strands, arranging them the way he wants. His face is painted in soft, beautiful tones by the yellow light.

Gale watches him just a beat too long, heat sparking in his belly, before he turns to start cleaning.

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That night, Bucky tells him to come to bed. *His* bed.

"You end up there anyway. Just—come on."

They're at the top of the stairs. It's left to the guest bedroom, right to Bucky's. Bucky turns right, and he follows.

He sits on the bed as Bucky pisses, shits, whatever—going through his usual bedtime routine like nothing is remotely different. Meanwhile, Gale can't even move. It's true that he ends up here every night anyway, so really, it should be no big thing that he's starting a couple hours early.

And yet, it is. It's a big goddamn thing, even if he can't explain why.

He waits until Bucky's back to settle in the bed. It's pushed up against the wall, so the only way to get in is from Gale's side—well, the left side, though it's all but become his—and he won't make Bucky climb over him in the dark.

Even though the thought of Bucky's weight on top of him like that, a warm, heavy blanket between him and the world, doesn't exactly sound unappealing.

When Bucky does get in the bed, however, he doesn't just default to their usual position, and instead lays down on his back. Gale's an equally poor sleeper in any position, so doesn't question it, just mirrors Bucky's posture. Fitting on the narrow bed means their sides are touching from shoulder all the way to ankle and a third of Gale's body is basically hanging off the edge of the mattress, but it's not unpleasant.

"I wasn't doing very well before you showed up at my door."

They're starting confessions early then. But Bucky doesn't pause like he's said all he plans to say and is waiting for Gale to reciprocate, so Gale stays quiet, waits.

"Dreamed of you dying a lot. Knew you were fine, of course, was sat right beside you flying that thing back home. But having you here makes it easier. To know for sure."

And yet, there's doubt in Bucky's voice. Like he thinks, after all this time, he might open his eyes one night and Gale won't be there.

It breaks his damn heart.

He dreams of a lot of things, but he's never dreamed of Bucky dead. Even his sleeping mind couldn't consider it. Until the day Bucky showed up in the stalag, he refused to picture Bucky anywhere other than in the cockpit of a B-17, giving the Germans hell and touching down safe on two wheels afterward. Leaving him behind to escape was the hardest thing he's ever done, but even then, even before he'd heard Bucky's voice over the radio, he never let himself imagine a world where he lived and his best friend didn't.

He's also aware that Bucky wouldn't have been that lucky. Knows exactly what must have been said around the base after his plane got shot down, and how much it would've affected a Bucky who'd been in London while it all happened. Knows exactly what the odds were for his survival post-escape because they calculated them together.

"I'm here, John." He doesn't know what else to say. "I'm right here."

"Yeah, I know." Bucky exhales, long and shaky. "I know. But I—"

Long moments of silence, and Gale finds his voice. “But?”

“I just—I want to hold you.” Quiet, so quiet he can barely hear it.

But he does hear it, and Gale’s heart damn near stops. He’s wanted that since Wyoming, since Abbotts, since flight school. He wants it like he wants air to breathe.

Bucky keeps going, doesn’t wait for a response. “Maybe then it would feel more real. And I keep holding myself back, because I get it, and I’d never want to hurt you, but Gale I—”

“What?” The word comes out small and strangled, longing and shock and desperation in its purest form. “Bucky—*John*—”

Holding himself back—hurt him—as if Gale wouldn’t want it? As if he would ever turn away—as if this isn’t the very thing he craves with an ache so deep it burns—the world could fall apart outside these walls and nothing would matter to him but this, Bucky and him and the words about to come out of Bucky’s mouth.

“You flinch every time I touch you!”

The words hit him with the force of a bullet.

“That’s—it’s not—” Sheer shock renders him near speechless. He knew it was too much to hope that Bucky hadn’t noticed his flinching, not with how attuned they were to each other. But he’s been so used to Bucky being able to damn near read his mind, the possibility that it could be interpreted this way never even occurred to him. “It’s not you,” he manages to say. “I could never—it’s not about you.”

“You’re *flinching* from me, Buck.”

Bucky sounds so pained that the truth splutters out from him in a panicked rush.

“From anyone. Even—” *Marge,* he doesn’t say. “I swear, Bucky, it’s not—there’s not a soul in the world I trust more than you. But I’m a little bit broken, in some ways I didn’t expect. And this is—this is one of them.”

“You don’t like being touched?” There’s no accusation, just a sort of honest curiosity.

“No, that’s not—” He’s missed Bucky’s casually touching him like one

might miss a limb, burned raw with want but resigned to the fact it wasn't coming back. "It's the surprise. Sound, touch, anything I'm not expecting. I can't help it."

A weight comes off his shoulders just to say it.

"Oh." He hears the gears turning behind that single word and waits. They're so close to that line they've never crossed, they might even have crossed it, but none of it matters in this moment. "That's—we can work with that." Calm, accepting, easy as anything.

Gale could cry. Can't, but *would*, at just how much he doesn't deserve the man beside him.

"Because you do—you do want it, right?" Bucky confirms. "To be touched. Held."

More than anything, he thinks. "Yes." Whispered, like a prayer.

"Okay. Alright then, turn over." Bucky nudges him a little to indicate the direction he means.

Gale does, breath caught in his chest. He's facing away from Bucky now and can't see what's coming, but he isn't afraid. It feels like the moment of calm between flak and fighters, the silence that signals the oncoming storm. Whatever happens now will break him apart—what remains to be seen is if it'll put him back together, too.

"You're gonna feel my hand, okay?"

He closes his eyes. *I don't deserve you*, he thinks again, but nods, hoping Bucky catches it in the dark. His voice is buried somewhere in his throat behind his frantic heart.

A gentle weight comes to rest on his hip, and he doesn't flinch.

It feels like victory.

"This okay?"

He can't speak, can't move. He's trapped, but in the best way.

"Need you to say something here, Buck." There's so much patient warmth in Bucky's voice that he feels like he's splintering already, edges coming apart.

"Mm." It's the most he can say.

“Good for more?” Almost teasing, but entirely lacking malice.

“Please.”

And then—Bucky is everywhere. A strong arm wraps all the way around him and pulls him into Bucky’s chest, bracketing him between broad shoulders. A knee hooks around his own, grappling until their legs are tangled together too tight to twist apart. Bucky is bigger than him, but not by *that* much, and Gale curls inward, pressing back as much as he can, begging without words to be engulfed and swallowed whole, so that no part of him exists outside the pocket of space that is Bucky.

Bucky’s head comes to rest at the top of his spine. “This okay?” he asks to the hairs at the nape of his neck, and every single one of those hairs stand up like he’s been hit with an electric shock. Maybe he has. Nothing else can explain the feeling coursing through his veins, electrifying and dizzying and comforting in one.

He melts into it, drowns in it, lets the last threads holding him together unravel entirely. Bucky is both the storm and the shelter. He’s never felt so safe.

“More than okay.” It’s everything. It’s why he left Wyoming in the middle of the night, and why he might never go back.

They’ve gone somewhere so far past the line, it’s on the other side of the Atlantic. He can’t bring himself to care one bit.

“I want you to stay,” Bucky says.

Whether he means in his arms, in his bed, or in his home, whether he means for right now or for forever, the answer is the very same. Gale can’t speak of *it*, but he can promise this.

“Not going anywhere.”

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For the first time in four months, neither one of them wakes during the night.

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Bucky is gone in the morning and doesn't come back for hours.

Gale lets him be throughout the day, even as afternoon slips into evening, knowing better than anyone that sometimes space *is* comfort.

Eventually, though, worry gets the better of him.

If Bucky truly didn't want to be found, he wouldn't go to the stream that he knows Gale knows about. At least, that's the reasoning he tells himself as he picks through the ever-longer grass toward the woods when it's so late in the day the sun has nearly disappeared over the horizon.

The truth is, he doesn't do well when Bucky's out of his sight. A prickly sort of dread tingles all over him like goosebumps and doesn't subside until Bucky is standing before him again, unharmed. He bears it for Bucky's usual afternoon excursions, but only barely.

It's not healthy, he's sure of that. But little about him is, and worrying about Bucky isn't the part of himself he wants to cut out first.

Besides, disappearing for the whole day isn't like Bucky. He tries not to think about last night, and whether that might be part of why.

By the time Gale makes it to the stream, dusk has fully fallen. But sitting on the usual flat rock is a familiar silhouette facing the water, and Gale breathes for the first time all day.

He makes his footsteps heavier as he approaches, announcing himself in advance, and comes to a stop several feet away from Bucky's perch. He doesn't want to intrude on whatever moment Bucky is having. As long as he can see Bucky before his eyes, see that he moves and breathes, he's happy to keep a distance.

But Bucky turns to look at him almost immediately, breaking any illusion of separation. His cheeks are wet.

Gale starts. He's never seen Bucky cry before.

He steps forward until he's standing right behind Bucky and rests a hand on his shoulder. There are a million reasons to cry. He would too, if he could.

“Curt always claimed he was the big spoon,” Bucky says, voice like sandpaper, and Gale understands which of the million options drove Bucky to this today.

“I miss him too.” Gale squeezes his shoulder, the only comfort he can give.

“And he always said he’d fly like an angel.” Bucky chuckles, wet, and looks up. Gale follows his gaze, scans for the first stars twinkling in the purple sky. “I hope it’s true he’s flying up there somewhere.”

Bucky is the Catholic, not him. But for his sake, Gale hopes it’s true too.

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“Will you dance with me, Buck?”

It’s evening. Bucky finished whatever drawing he was working on for the day nearly an hour ago and has been winding through his record collection since then, listening to a smattering of different songs from his usual spot on the couch. Gale can’t say he didn’t expect this moment to come.

Don’t make me dance, Marge.

But it isn’t Marge standing in front of him asking this time, and there isn’t a thing in the world he can deny Bucky when he looks like that, puppy dog face and earnest eyes.

“Yeah, alright.”

Gale isn’t into music like Bucky is and doesn’t recognize the song that starts on the record player, but he doesn’t need to. Bucky dances a rhythm all his own, and keeping time to the sway of Bucky’s body is easy. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s staying in formation, adjusting his plane to Bucky’s bearing time after time.

Bucky leads and he follows. They spin around the room long after the music stops, Bucky’s voice providing the melody, until even the beat-beat-beat of their hearts are in sync.

Chapter End Notes

Keen readers might notice the chapter count went up...this may have gotten away from me a little bit. Blame the buckies! Third and final chapter coming soon.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

I could kiss him, Gale thinks with startling clarity.

He doesn't, yet. But he wants to.

There is a strange, beautiful intimacy to watching someone get ready for bed.

Gale sits on the edge of the mattress, as he always does now, some sort of odd superstition he can't put his finger on, as Bucky pads in and out of the room, returning each time with another step of his routine complete. Minty breath first, after brushing his teeth. Then his hair mussed, free of the product that holds his curls up during the day. His shirt comes off next, discarded to the laundry pile in the corner. That Bucky normally sleeps shirtless, and has only been refraining out of a sense of decorum while he's here, is a fact he learned just last night. Needless to say, they've remedied the issue, and Gale is just as excited at the prospect of being in the arms of a shirtless Bucky as he was a clothed one. More excited, even, to have one less barrier between the warmth of his skin.

He's not quite ready to be shirtless himself. It feels a little too much like being defenseless, and he battles more monsters asleep than awake these days.

The last step to Bucky's routine is the most surprising—he prays. Nothing dramatic, no impassioned sinking to his knees or fervent recitation of the Bible. Just a few murmured sentences with his head bowed, too quiet for Gale to make out, before he clambers into the bed.

The Bucky he meets just before bed might be his favorite. Hair flopping messily over his forehead, eyes half-lidded, crawling awkwardly on all fours to the far side of the bed without the slightest self-consciousness.

No one else gets to see the unflappable John Egan like this. All his defenses lowered, peeled away one by one, soft and shirtless and sleepy.

I could kiss him, Gale thinks with startling clarity.

He doesn't, yet. But he wants to.

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The first chill arrives in the air.

Not winter, not even fall, but the lightest kiss of cold with the breeze, especially before the sun rises and after it sets.

Even that faint trace is enough to turn Bucky's mood on its head. He smiles less, drinks more—not in the house, holding to his promise, but that only means he spends even more time out back by the stream, an ever-dwindling bottle by his side. He wears too many layers and sweats through them, but refuses to take any off, snapping at Gale the one time he brings it up. Bucky is a furnace when they lay together at night, burning up so hot Gale can barely get any sleep surrounded by him, and still he shivers and shivers like the cold is somewhere in his bones no soup or sweater can reach.

It's the stalag. The echoes of those bleak, inescapable winter months, the marches in the snow, the nights huddled beneath threadbare blankets.

Gale doesn't know what to do. Bucky slips away from him little by little as the warm days grow shorter and the cool nights longer, and Gale doesn't know what to do.

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They go out.

It's easier under the influence, as most things are, so they go to a bar. Bucky orders his usual whiskey and Gale gets a coke—he can't stomach the thought of ginger beer for the same reason they no longer eat breakfast; every sip tastes like war. Two glasses in, Bucky's shoulders relax, alcohol smoothing away the usual stiffness that comes with being around so many people. For all that Gale's the one who can't stand being touched, Bucky's the one who struggles with crowds.

They spoke, once, in the dead of night after the rest of the boys were asleep, about what happened to Bucky between bailing out and arriving at the stalag. Gale remembers holding Bucky as tight as he dared in that rickety bunk bed and crying into his hair as the story unfolded, silent tears that froze against his skin in the German winter.

He hasn't cried since. They haven't spoken of it since either, but Gale doesn't need the reminder to understand why Bucky doesn't like crowds.

But Bucky was the one who wanted to come out today. *Like old times,* he said in the kitchen—it's the first Gale's seen of old Bucky's spark since the weather turned, and saying no was never an option.

It's nice, anyway. Sitting amidst the jaunty music, dressed up smart as he can in a collared shirt he bought just for this, sipping on a drink, admiring Bucky in the yellow-orange tones of the bar lights. Once, he was a man with a beautiful woman on his arm who refused to dance with her when all the world would've clapped and cheered for it, shamed by something as silly as lack of talent, bothered by something as inconsequential as the opinions of others. He couldn't dance with Bucky now if he wanted to, but he wants to, right out here in front of everyone, and it's another of a million ways in which he's a very changed man.

Bucky catches his eye from two seats down—they're here together, clearly, but have taken every precaution to make sure it's not the type of *together* that will draw any suspicious stares, just two old war buddies drinking their way to happier places—and his gaze is so smoldering that Gale's skin prickles. Without breaking eye contact, Bucky gulps down the rest of his drink, throat working in a way that could almost be considered obscene, and clatters his empty glass on the counter.

"Another one," Bucky rasps, ostensibly at the bartender, but his eyes are still fixed on Gale. Sharp and impassioned, like he's looking through a bombsight amidst a hail of flak and Gale's the IP.

"Me too," Gale says, again toward the bartender, but his glass is only half empty and he's looking right at Bucky, the words intended for him and him alone.

The bar is warm, thrumming with the natural heat of dancing bodies, but Gale feels hot under his collar in a way that has nothing to do with any of that. Is this how those women in East Anglia felt when

Bucky chased after then?

I could kiss him, he thinks again. For the first time, he's sure Bucky's thinking the same thing.

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Bucky kisses him at something close to midnight on the first day of October.

They're lying in bed face to face, eyes closed, both pretending to be asleep for the sake of the other. Bucky's breathing tells Gale he's awake, and a betting man would always put money on Gale being awake, given he sleeps something like three hours a night, but it's an old charade. Continued for the sake of familiarity.

It's cold enough outside the cocoon of the blanket they're under that Bucky's warmth is welcome rather than suffocating. They're much less tangled together like this than in any other position, and it's hard work fitting on the bed—they don't, really, unless Gale hangs off the edge and Bucky presses himself nearly flat against the wall—but Gale likes the intimacy of Bucky's every exhale on his cheek, against his lips. A teaser of the real thing.

He likes that he can open his eyes and Bucky's face is right there, his favorite-ever collection of features, the long nose and square lashes and scraggly mustache.

"Wanna kiss you."

It takes him a moment to realize the slurred words are coming from the real-life Bucky beside him and not a made-up one in his mind. When the realization does strike, Gale's eyes fly open.

Just in time to see a trembling finger coming toward his face.

His heart jumps, but he doesn't flinch.

Bucky's finger settles against the base of his chin. Traces a line up his cheekbone and back, up and back. *Wanna kiss you.* The words linger in the air, both a statement and a question, like most things between them.

“Kiss me then,” Gale breathes out, softer than a whisper, softer than a prayer, so soft Bucky probably only hears it because their lips are inches apart.

Gale holds himself perfectly still as Bucky leans carefully forward, bridging those inches one little fraction at a time. Gale closes his eyes and holds perfectly still and waits, as he’s waited his whole life, for John Egan to be brave for them both.

Bucky’s lips meet his. They’re dry and chapped, cracked with the autumn chill. Marge’s lips were always soft, but Marge isn’t in this bed with them—he lets the memory of her go. His lips are probably just as chapped, maybe worse, calloused with how often he worries at them with his teeth. They are matched, in this as in everything else. Two broken men whose pieces match.

He pulls away to breathe, dizzy with the enormity of what they’ve just done. He’s never kissed a man before—Bucky is the only man he’d ever kiss.

“I feel warm, Buck,” comes the whisper, followed by a startled laugh. “So warm.”

“That’s good.” He leans forward again, smiling. He gets to keep this. After everything they’ve lost, he gets to keep this, and by god he will. His hand finds Bucky’s cheek. “That’s real good, John.”

-

“Has there been anyone else?” The question’s been on his mind for days, and it stumbles out in the liminal space between dinner and bed.

“I’ve been with a lotta people, Buck,” comes the immediate reply, somewhere between teasing and serious.

Gale shakes his head. He knows *that*, Bucky’s sexual experience isn’t news to him, nor does it actually bother him. That’s not—that’s not exactly what he’s asking. “No, I mean—more than that.”

“You wondering how many were more than a quick fuck?”

That’s not exactly how he would’ve put it, but Gale nods, ashamed. He

can't meet Bucky's eyes. He knows it's unfair to ask, especially given his own history, but he can't help himself.

Bucky is silent for a long time. Then, eventually, "You see anyone else here, Buck?" He sounds weary in a way that makes Gale's stomach turn unpleasantly. "It's only ever been you. You're the one who always tried to divide his heart, not me."

The barb hurts, but only because it's true.

"Not anymore," Gale promises, because he's never actually been able to divide his heart since meeting John Egan, he was only better at convincing himself he could. Some of the weariness dissipates, like Bucky never expected to hear those words out loud. "I'm all yours, John."

Bucky's eyes turn dark with desire. Gale watches it happen, and would be lying if he said it didn't ignite a reciprocal heat in him too.

"Mine," Bucky says, *growls*, surging forward, and presses the truth of it into Gale's lips like a tattoo.

They don't make it to bed for a good while yet.

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It happens in a blink.

He's at the store, scanning the shelves for a particular type of jam Bucky's taken a liking to. It pairs well with dinner rolls, and is sufficiently better quality than anything they were served over at Abbotts that no pesky memories come attached with every bite.

One moment, he's reaching for the jar.

Then there's a cold tingle down his spine like a warning.

The next moment, he's standing over a man who is collapsed on the floor and moaning in pain, looking at him with wide, confused, accusing eyes. Blood drips from his nose. "What the hell, man? You decked me!"

Gale stares, uncomprehending. A smaller version of him used to lay on

the floor like that and look up at a different man, one who liked to end conversations in his home with his fists.

The realization hits.

Oh, fuck. Panic rises in his throat, and he staggers backward, sinking to the floor. *Oh fuck, what has he done.*

The police arrive very quickly after that.

They take his name and his address—he rattles off his house in Casper, first, it's the only home address he's ever had to give. They ask for a local address, and he thinks of lying, but gives them Bucky's place in the end. He's in no position to be caught telling untruths.

When he says he just got back from the war, something in the officer's eyes softens.

If it's pity, he doesn't want it.

"We need to take you to the station, son," the officer says. He has a gruff, authoritative kind of voice that reminds him of a lot of superiors he's had over the years. "We'll get this sorted out."

They don't cuff him, and it's a small mercy.

The drive from the store to the police station is short and tense, but provides enough time for the officer to explain to him what actually happened—because he certainly isn't in a position to explain anything himself. Apparently the man in the store tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, presumably to ask him a question or request he pick his jam a little faster. Something decent and civilized that men would typically discuss with polite words. Only he whirled around and clocked the man straight in his face instead.

Curt would be proud, Gale thinks a little wildly, before they put him in a holding cell and suddenly he can't see Curt's face in his mind's eye, or that RAF prick Curt put to rights, or his father, or even Bucky. There's only the stalag, cramped barracks and short ceilings and walls so tight it feels hard to breathe, watched on every side, a prison, trapped—

He takes a deep, deep breath, tries to hold it for a count of ten. He makes it to five before he's sputtering, drawing in the next breath, and the next, each one increasingly panicked. The air here is old and stale. Gray cement walls, a bed in the corner, bars over a window up near

the ceiling—

Gale loses time. When he comes back to himself, desperate to hold onto the fact that this is Wisconsin and he's not been thrown in the cooler and there isn't a single kraut with a gun outside the door, there's barely any light coming in from the window.

Night must have fallen.

The darkness only makes it all worse.

Just when he's working up the nerve to call for help, get on his knees and beg someone to get him out of here, pride be damned, ready to confess every single horrible thing that's happened to him that means sitting in a room like this is a particular kind of torture, the door opens.

It's the officer from before. "You're free to go."

"I—what?"

Can it be that easy? He punched a man. Reacted badly to a stimulus, sure, the hyper-vigilance he developed in the war rearing its ugly head, but he flew off the handle and punched a man. He drew blood.

"We're not in the habit of punishing our nation's heroes. Come on, let's get you out of here. I think we can all agree this was just a very unfortunate misunderstanding."

Gale rises to his feet and follows the officer out, unwilling to question his good fortune. Anything to get out of there.

He stands outside under the stars and breathes, breathes, breathes. The air is fresh, crisp. It smells like rain is coming.

"I'll drive you back, son. Come on."

He doesn't have it in him to protest, knowing there's no easier way to get back home right now. If the officer starts asking questions he shouldn't be, poking at why he's staying with Bucky or how long he's been there or any of the other million damning details that could give them away, they'll have to cross that bridge when it comes.

They pull up to Bucky's house in the officer's car, police insignia all over it. He can't imagine what Bucky must think. He can't imagine what Bucky must have been thinking this whole time when he didn't

come back home.

As soon as he steps out of the car, the front door swings open. Just like it did a month ago, when it was the only thing he could hope for, the only good thing.

“Buck!”

Bucky comes out to meet him. His eyes flicker briefly to the officer, still standing by the car, before settling on Gale. Bucky looks him over once, quickly, that familiar methodical scan looking for injuries and issues. Gale doubts he finds anything besides newly bloodied knuckles.

“Head inside, okay? Get yourself warm.” Bucky’s voice is gentle, too gentle. He hasn’t heard what Gale’s done yet. “Let me just talk to the officer, and I’ll be right in.”

Gale nods, complies. No need to say anything further in front of the officer, in case he starts coming to any—entirely truthful—conclusions.

Gale takes a seat on the couch, that same couch, and tries not to feel like he’s fucked up the only good thing left in his life.

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Gale is still sitting inside when Bucky comes back, eyes dark with the burden of *knowing*. He’s selfishly glad someone else explained everything, because there’s no way he could.

He looks away, unable to hold Bucky’s gaze. “The bike is still at the store,” he says, a little stupidly, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“Forget that, we’ll figure it out. I’m just glad you’re okay.” This is somewhat new between them, truths in the daytime as well as the night. Or, well, it’s already night now. “I was real worried.”

“I’m sorry.”

For making Bucky worry, for bringing the police to their front door, for being so trapped in his own head this whole thing happened in the first place.

“You’re shaking, Buck.”

So he is. He didn’t notice until now.

“Will you eat something?”

The very thought of it turns his stomach, and he shakes his head immediately.

“Something to drink, then. Coffee? Hot chocolate? Coke?”

Bucky lists off a slew of options like he thinks they actually have any of those in the house, when Gale’s the one who runs the kitchen and knows for a fact they don’t. Doesn’t matter, though, because what he actually wants is the one thing they’re sure to have. “Something stronger.”

Bucky comes back with a bottle of whiskey.

For all he doesn’t drink, Gale’s been around enough whiskey in his life to know it’s top-shelf, much better than the swill Bucky’s been drinking on the regular. He can’t decide if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that Bucky pulled this out for them now.

Two very generous pours later, they sit in silence in the living room and Gale tries to stop shaking.

He knows Bucky probably has questions, but he doesn’t want to talk about it. Really, he’d prefer they could pretend like nothing unusual happened today at all, but the crack scientists that brought them every measure of war weapon have yet to invent a time machine.

“Can I—can I come over there, Buck?” Bucky asks him eventually. He sounds careful, hesitant. Gale doesn’t blame him.

“If you want.” He tries his best to seem casual. It isn’t Bucky’s fault that he has a lunatic in his house, and Bucky’s perfectly entitled to keep his distance, no matter what promises they’ve made to each other already.

Something flashes across Bucky’s face. Gale looks away before it can crystallize into a clear expression, fully aware he’s fucked everything up but unwilling to see the aftermath spelled out on Bucky’s familiar features. Disgust. *Fear*.

Footsteps, and suddenly Bucky is sitting next to him, so close he can

almost feel Bucky pressed along his side—but not actually touching. That last inch between them can't be anything other than deliberate. Bucky keeping his space.

"If I—*jesus*. Buck, there is *nothing* I want more right now than to sit here next to you. And maybe hold you, if you'll let me. But I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to do, okay? Not *ever*, but especially not today."

Gale believes him. There is nothing Gale believes in right now, except him. "Okay."

Bucky waits, silent and still. True to his word.

It's not that Gale is testing him, but every second that the gap between them remains, the offer to close it given but not forced, something relaxes inside him. "I—I want," he says after a minute, voice small.

Bucky's arms are around him barely a breath later.

He closes his eyes and leans into that comforting warmth. It feels so, so good. For a moment, or a hundred, the stalag and all its echoes are very far away.

"You did nothing wrong," Bucky tells him, and Gale tries desperately to believe it.

-

Hours later, in the bathroom getting ready for bed, he looks in the mirror to find red-rimmed eyes and damp cheeks staring back at him.

Only then does he realize—he'd been crying.

After so long, held in Bucky's arms, he'd finally cried.

-

Days pass before Gale settles back into his skin, but he gets there

eventually, unwilling to let months of progress be snatched away by a few difficult hours.

And he gets there eventually because Bucky won't stop looking at him with that heat in his eyes, dark with want, and he wants to be entirely present in mind and body when they finally get around to doing something about it.

So maybe it's no surprise that a little over a week after Gale's *grocery store experience*, a euphemism coined by Bucky that inevitably stuck, they find themselves here. On the couch, something soothing drifting from the record player, windows shuttered, lights dimmed, pulling off each other's clothes.

He's seen Bucky naked before, just as Bucky's seen him. But furtive, stolen glances in barracks and showers are different to this, miles and miles of skin on display, all for him to look and lick and touch. It's a heady feeling, tracing Bucky's strong lines from shoulder to wrist, ankle to waist, chest to the dip of his navel. Even headier when Bucky does the same to him, light, reverent strokes along his back, his stomach, the bend of his knee.

Time feels liquid. The world outside feels so, blissfully far away.

They end up with Gale on his back and Bucky hovered over him, fingers trailing along his thigh. Gale feels splayed open, bare of any of his defenses, but for once he isn't scared. Not when it's Bucky.

"Have you ever—?"

And whether Bucky's asking in the specific or the general, the answer is the same. "No." A single strangled syllable from the base of his throat. He and Marge fooled around a little before the war, sure, but that was kissing and fingers drifting lower than they should. Nothing more. Nothing like this.

Bucky's hand continues its motion up and down his thigh, like soothing a spooked horse. "Not with another man or—?"

Bucky's always been his weakness, but there's no one who's ever made him feel braver, or *safer*, safe enough to say the words, "Not with anyone." His last secret, maybe.

To his credit, Bucky only nods. His hand never stops, up and down and up and down in long, gentle strokes. His voice is like velvet, soft and smooth. "I'm gonna take such good care of you, darling."

Something warm bubbles in his belly. *Darling.* It feels nice. Like *Buck*, but even softer. It feels right for this moment.

He thinks back to *that* night so many weeks ago, when he stood on Bucky's doorstep a broken man, chasing the only safety he'd ever known. Both that moment and the person he was then—one who had only the vaguest sense of how it felt to be held fast, one who had never tasted Bucky's lips—feel so very far away now.

"Feels safe," he says softly, an echo across time, and Bucky smiles just a little like he too can hear those same words said by a very different Gale in a very different moment. "Lead the way."

He follows Bucky up, up, up, and then all the way down.

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The letter arrives without any kind of pomp on a dreary Tuesday evening. Plain white envelope, still crisp at every edge, sealed by tucking the flap into the folds of the envelope rather than by sticking it shut.

Even before he reads the return address, Gale knows by that little quirk that this letter is from Marge. She never liked licking envelopes shut, always made Gale do *that rather barbaric practice* for her.

"You've gone white as a sheet," Bucky says from the kitchen. He's washing the dishes from dinner, his effort to contribute to the fragile domesticity they've managed to carve out. Gale cooks, Bucky cleans. They are neither of them women, and therefore have both become wives. "You good?"

Bucky must see the envelope in his hand, but as always, doesn't ask a direct question. Lets Gale come to him, if he wants.

"It's from—" It occurs to Gale that he's yet to say Marge's name under the roof of this house, and feels weirdly like doing so would be some sort of violation. Bucky's said it, sure, but that's different—Bucky wasn't the man who proposed to her with every intention of following through, thwarted only by a war that broke him into pieces and put him back together in a different arrangement. "It's from back home."

Because this is home *now* but Casper, with all its memories and demons therein, was home first.

“Marge wrote?” Bucky asks, clearly without expecting an answer. “What does it say?”

There’s no question of privacy. What concerns one of them concerns the other, and never more so than with Marge. She made it that way herself, writing Bucky after their separation, and he made it that way, when he proposed marriage and then rescinded it to wind up on Bucky’s doorstep instead.

He pushes the envelope toward Bucky, unopened. A coward’s move, maybe, but it’s Bucky’s name on the front, not his.

Bucky opens the envelope, pulls out the letter. “It’s for you,” he says evenly, handing it back. If he’s surprised, he doesn’t show it.

Gale can’t say *he’s* surprised, either. The lights in his house will have been dark for weeks, and Marge must have guessed this is where he’d be.

In Marge’s elegant script, the letter reads:

Dear Gale,

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope it finds you at this address at all, because that means you’re where you should be. I don’t expect to write you again. After everything that’s happened, I think it’s for the best. But I wanted you to know that I am well, and even in these trying months, have found reasons to smile.

I suspect you have too. Be happy, Gale. You deserve it.

M

He falls to his knees, overcome. Bucky is there to catch him.

-

Gale wakes up screaming.

And for the first time since he knew what war tasted like—he screams

loudly, in full voice, enough to wake the neighbors if there were any.

He doesn't need to search for a map of constellations or spring out of bed toward Bucky's room, because Bucky is right there beside him, already awake, a hand hovering over his arm waiting for permission to touch.

Gale pushes himself toward Bucky, desperate for the contact, craving it. "Please," he whispers, hoarse. All he feels is mud and cold. "John, please."

"C'mere. Shh, it's okay. It's okay, Buck, c'mere."

He burrows into Bucky's arms, lets himself be held in the warmth and strength of them. He feels, above all else, *safe*.

End Notes

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